

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Magnificent anemone; Fishing dhow in channel; Chomodoris lochi on lattice coral; Marbled cleaner shrimp; Flatworm; Chromodoris africana nudibranch on sponge

# Zanzibar

*Diving Unguja & Pemba Island*

**The spacious, purpose-built dhow slid through the calm Indian Ocean. We were briefed sitting under the shade area of the deck, then kitted up and went through our buddy checks before a giant stride took us into the 30°C sea. Looking down, I could just make out the dive site, an old British lighter, 27 metres below me. It was 9:30 a.m. and the day was going fantastically.**

Text and photos by Christopher Bartlett

I'd started the morning in Dar-es-Salaam and caught a Coastal Airways Cessna 182 for the 20-minute 07:30 flight to Stone Town on the west coast of Unguja, more commonly known as Zanzibar, for some low-level sunrise shots of the outlying reefs. Ten minutes in a taxi, and I was kitting up at One Ocean Divers, a mug of coffee steaming next to me.

One Ocean started 16 years ago, and in 1999, it was taken over by Aussie Gary Greig and his South African wife, Gail. From one dive shop in Stone Town, they now operate from four other resorts around the island. Kit was dished out whilst more coffee was brewed and then consumed, before we were walked

past the palm trees, down the small beach, and onto the waiting dhow. On the leisurely cruise out to a reef near Bawe Island, acquaintances were made and the loudmouth been-there-done-it-all-in-25-dives Harvard post-grad Italian diver was quickly identified and avoided as a buddy.

The wreck itself was a tad disappointing. Although the briefing by Amani had covered all the essentials and had been thorough in terms of safety procedures, no indication of the size of the wreck had been given. Hence, my initial thoughts of "With a lifeboat that size, it must be a huge wreck" soon turned to disappointment when Amani went straight for it. It was host to a large school of





CLOCKWISE: Zanzibar's west coast; Detail of giant clam; Featherstar; Scorpionfish; Bifurcated flatworm; Healthy table corals; Diver with large gorgonian fancoral; Starfish

our best to convince our Italian expert that a Stonefish sting really would spoil his day, it was time to pull on our shorties again.

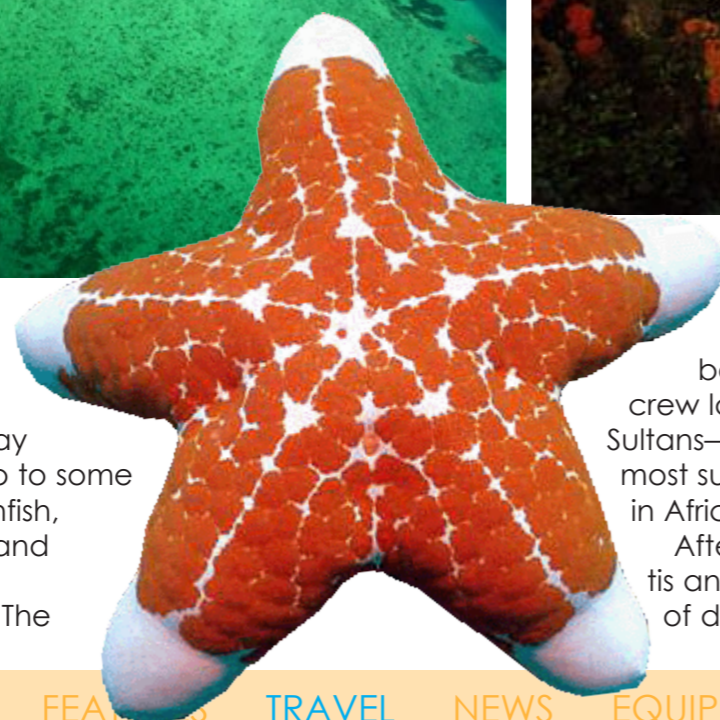
The visibility was around 15 metres, and the site deserved its moniker. Table and plate corals adorned the reef, and we spotted common lionfish, lots of nudis, an undulated moray eel, a hermit crab, huge gorgonian fans, a giant clam, and two blue spotted rays. However, the highlight of the dive was the large remora that took a fancy to Captain Fantastic's bare leg, his squeals being



striped eel catfish and long strands of whip coral (that numbered one less after some unusual buoyancy "skills" from the Adriatic).

Following the dive plan, we then finned away following the contours of the sandy bottom up to some outcrops of reef, home to a bearded scorpionfish, and an assortment of triggerfish, butterflyfish, and coachmen.

By the time we'd started puttering along to The



Aquarium at Murogo Reef (how many Aquariums are there around the world?), our bellies were grumbling, and the crew laid out a spread fit for Omani Sultans—once rulers of Zanzibar and the most successful slave and spice traders in Africa.

After samoosas, spring rolls, chapattis and fresh fruits and a leisurely spot of digestion during which we tried





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### Stone Town

Back on shore in Stone Town, there is a bit of sightseeing to do. Central Stone Town is a labyrinth of narrow streets and alleyways, flanked by crumbling mansions and mosques. The main attractions are the massive Zanzibari wooden doors, Mercury's restaurant and bar (Freddy of Queen fame is Unguja's most famous son) by Big Tree, the House of Wonders, the Omani Fort, Tippu Tip's house, the Hamamni Persian Baths, and the fish market (conservationists beware: you will find sharks here). The night food market in Forodhani Gardens is alleged, by the same guidebook that I used in Dar es Salaam, to host the best food market in East Africa. If the guidebook was written for flies, this is undoubtedly true.



vaguely reminiscent of dolphin chatter as he trashed around trying to avoid its attempted love bites. Back on the dhow, he was informed that remora like to live on sharks, and that one is never very far from the other. "I could've been killed then", he shrieked. "If only," thought I.

The reefs around Stone Town are fairly plentiful and other, larger wrecks exist, too. And whilst any aficionado of Bass Lake would gawk in amazement at the coral formations and the fish life, the reefs have suffered greatly from plagues of crown of thorns, draining the coral of any colour.

### Matemwe & Mnemba

Situated close to Mnemba Atoll, a shallow expanse of coral reef with a tiny heart-shaped island on its western fringe surrounded by some step drop-offs, Matemwe is

the "must-dive" of Unguja. With average viz 20 metres or better, there are a multitude of sites to dive, and its calm conditions make it suitable for novices and experienced divers alike.

One Ocean's centre here was on the premises of the Beach Village where standard rooms are comfortable and clean. The Shamba suites are huge and charm-



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Omani Fort; Mosque minaret and Anglican cathedral towers dominate the skyline of Stone Town. The cathedral was built over the old slave market; Typical Stone Town alleyway; Tinga tinga artist displays his work; Breakfast view of Stone Town from Hotel Kiponda; Forodhani Gardens, deserted in daylight, becomes a hive of activity in evenings with the food market; Detail and full view of Stone Town's famous doors



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a relaxing atmosphere that even the open water students were looking like seasoned veterans.

If it was a haven of peace and tranquility on the boat, under it, the ocean was buzzing. With great viz, our first site was West Bank. Starting at six metres and then rolling down into a 50m drop-off, it was covered

After another dhow-diving lunch taken anchored over a snorkelling site that had several divisions of sergeant majors flitting over it, it was time to visit Turtle Reef. The site was not one unbroken reef, but rather coral mounds interspersed with sand, where unusual sightings included two left-eyed flounder, a huge octopus in some rocks, and a grand total of zero turtles between eight divers. However, lionfish fans were delighted; there was an abundance of these delicate-looking but venom-carrying members of the scorpionfish family.

Having returned along the same road due to extra-low tides, instead of in the dhow, beers were cracked around the poolside bar and new arrivals greeted like distant cousins, before dinner and a relatively early night under the sleep-inducing whir of the strategically positioned fans. If you want to treat yourself, the Shamba suites are well worth the extra 50 dollars, and for a special romantic night for two, the honeymoon suite is even more secluded and

ingly decorated. Located next to the beautiful infinity pool a few paces from the beach, it also had excellent equipment, friendly and efficient service.

After a bumpy 45-minute drive to the launch site in a daladala and transfer to another purpose-built diving dhow, the MV Jessica, the divers carried on the banter from the night before. More flat sea and baking sunshine make for such

in reef fish and eels, hard and soft corals, and large schools of fusiliers. There were the intriguing juvenile black snapper, damselfish in the staghorn coral, royal and emperor angelfish, chocolate dips, blue spotted rays, two-bar clown fish. Thumbing through the fish book back on the dhow, it was a case of "Saw that, saw that, saw that, loads of them, two of them, few of those, etc..."



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Green turtle with Remora fish; Spotted lionfish; Matemwe Beach Village; Rock lobster

Striped eel catfish (above); Color-changing octopus attempts to attract a mate

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garden eels stick their heads out of the sand and start swaying to the tune of an invisible snake-charmer.

## Kendwa

I caught a ride across the top of the island where there are two resorts to choose from. Nungwi was a dusty village that has rapidly grown into the most frequented and fashionable (read promoted) resort on the island. It has the liveliest nightclubs and the greatest selection of restaurants, but is also overrun by tourists and has poor swimming beaches. For divers, there are a few local sites, but the best dives involve a long dhow trip to Mnemba.

The less-publicised resort of Kendwa has a huge beach that is ideal for bathing even at low tide, offers a choice of eight places to stay,

ranging from thatched bandas at 15 dollars a night, to air-con en-suites, has six restaurants, is the location of the only dive centre using zodiacs (rubber ducks), and has some great local reefs. By operating with the faster craft, Scuba-Do can get their divers past Nungwi, round the tip of the island, and onto Mnemba dive sites in just under 30 minutes—quicker even than from Matemwe, which overlooks the atoll.

The dive center is situated next to the excellent Bikini Beach Bar and very reasonable Sunset Bungalows (50 USD for a spacious en-suite double with a traditional Zanzibari bed that could sleep four). The BCDs weren't as new as those at One Ocean, as they were coming up for replacement,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kendwa Beach is the longest in the north, good for a long walk; Weedy Scorpionfish; Bommie at End of the World dive site; White mouthed moray eel near Kichafi



Porcupinefish swimming slowly above the table corals, false stonefish hid on the rocks whilst peppered and white-mouthed morays skulked in crevices; paperfish swayed gently in rocky recesses, rock cod went about their business and, looking off into the beautiful blue, a napoleon wrasse cruised by unperturbed by a school of kingfish.

The last dive was at Mnemba's take on The Aquarium. With a more open seascape, it was like being in the aquarium rather than looking in to it. We drifted on the gentle current from one outcrop of coral to another, marvelling at the size of the schools of fusiliers and the number of green turtles. In total, twelve individuals were observed, including three resting on one outcrop, with remoras being cleaned by accompanying wrasse attached

to their carapaces.

has its own plunge pool, beach access, and chef. Fully refreshed and as relaxed as a rasta in a ganja pile, it was time to blow bubbles at Mnemba again. Small Wall was home to

As we eventually moved off the site, the dive master led us to a vast sandy patch. Not the ideal spot for a safety stop you think, until hundreds of





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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Yellow Margin Moray eel in lattice coral; Coral crab; Durban dancing shrimp; Diver on one of Pemba's signature walls

cent of a fantasy world.

Hunga was the home to even bigger schools of snapper, and the impressive crocodile flathead that can be found in significant numbers resting on the sandy bottom in gullies and between bommies. Rare finds included sea-horses, a Mauritius scorpionfish, and a Weedy scorpionfish. Visibility was between 15 and 25 metres, and the water was still a balmy 29C.

Post-diving, one of the bars would generally have something going on, and they could all be reached by walking down the beach; the only hazard at night being either nausea or hysteria brought on by the insincere declarations of local playboys to female tourists. With reduced travelling time and morning and afternoon dives with a long shore-break in between, Kendwa is also more suitable for mixed parties made up of divers and non-divers, children and adults.

### Pemba Island

The 35-minute half-empty flight yielded some more picture-postcard aerial shots of uninhab-

ited islands and the reefs, before touching down in Chake Chake—Pemba's biggest town, half-way up the west coast at the end of a long mangrove-lined creek.

The airport was a small ramshackle affair, and despite a plethora of attractions including atmospheric ruins, primeval forest, unique bird species, deserted beaches, and some of the best diving in the Indian Ocean, Pemba probably hosts less than 100 tourists at any given time.

Swahili Divers and the Kervan Saray eco-resort on the northwest coast are run by Farhat Jah, a seemingly eccentric mixture of Turkish and Indian heritage with a resolutely British upbringing, and his Dutch wife, Cisca. Known by locals as Mr. Raf—and just Raf to anyone else—there is something of a young Basil Fawlty in him that, whilst a little surprising initially, is ultimately endearing.

The accommodation was built in 2008 from local materials, and quarry where the bricks were cut is, well, a stone's throw away. Any



Leaf fish (above); Royal Angelfish (inset)

but safety was far from overlooked here; each BCD came with a surface marker bouy in the pocket and a briefing on how and when to deploy it.

Local sites included Kichafi and Haji reefs and their extensive lattice coral formations, peacock mantis shrimp, paperfish and bearded scorpionfish, Nankivell with its giant plate corals in fascinating formations, rays, napoleon wrasse, groupers, and the stunning Hunga Reef with its interconnected bommies and a huge variety of hard and soft corals, reminis-



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als twenty metres down were clearly visible. Backwards roll, hot tub, OK, going down. Equalize, all together? look around. W-O-W. With a capital W. On one side was a wall, like the top of a submerged mountain, covered in hard and soft corals of all descriptions, positively teeming with fish. On the other, the bluest blue, near perfect viz, dropping down, and down, and down. Lucky there's no point talking underwater, because I was speechless. There was not one moment when there was not something to watch.

The surface interval snack of still-



imported goods come by dhow whose carbon footprint is limited to the fire that the crew use to warm their food at night when at sea. It is the best priced on the island with dorm beds and doubles, and good value packages. Food is wholesome and filling, and is locally-sourced and cooked with love by Chef Mzee Ali on charcoal (chocolate biscuit cake a speciality), unlike the other two resorts that ship most supplies in, and is the most affordable Pemba diving option.

Raf pioneered much of the diving from Pemba, and has discovered many of the sites himself, hence the odd names. You'll find no Aquarium here. Deep Freeze, Slobodan's Bunker (after the ex-Serbian warmonger), Le Reef Caché (hidden reef in French) and Emilio's Back Passage to name a few. With a wealth of knowledge of the reefs and conditions, years of experience, and a passion for underwater photography and videography, and you can pick up a host of tips from Raf, provided you can keep up.

The RIB zipped across the top of the flat sea, taking us to Deep Freeze. The ride had been soothing, re-enforcing the remoteness of this small island 50 kilometres off the coast of one of the poorest countries in the world. We passed local in sailing dhows or dugouts, fishing teams of up to ten men swam nets into a circle, slapping the water as they went to scare fish into the net. A lone spearfisherman here and there in Jacques Cousteau mask and an elbow-grease powered spear hunted for dinner. Now it was time to see if it Pemba lived up to its growing reputation. Had I saved the best for last?

Looking down as we kitted up, the table cor-



LEFT TO RIGHT: Chake Chake mosque; Lush coral bommie at Egger's Ascent; Walls are everywhere; Linda's flatworm; Mauritius scorpionfish

warm crepes was taken on a deserted island of fossilized coral and white sand before heading off to Slobodan's Bunker, best described by looking down on your hand with digits splayed, each gap a ravine in the reef full of marine life.

The following day, at Le Trek, we watched four Napoleon Wrasse pass below us and a school of Barracuda cruise by as we kept the wall left shoulder. Then one of the five other clients started babbling and bubbling loudly, pointing back to the right. And along came a six-metre wingspan Manta, accompanied by the largest and ugliest old cobia I have ever laid my eyes upon. She glided by on the outside to the edge of visibility, then turned, slowly soaring back, under me and up over the group.

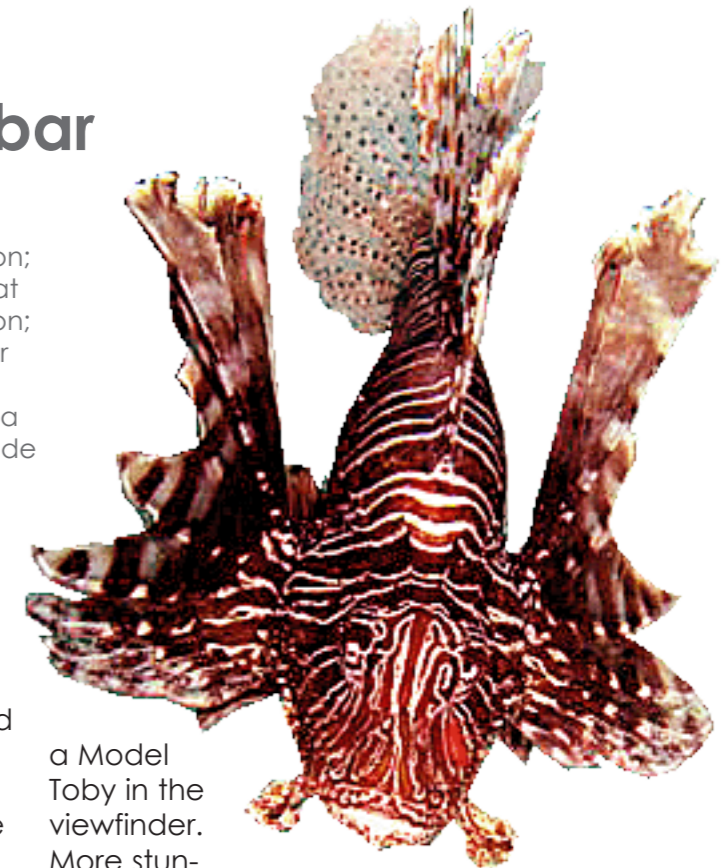


Maybe it's a mix of the remoteness of the island, the remoteness of Raf's sites, and a touch of melancholy from sitting at a keyboard, but the diving here felt like real adventure, as if all I needed was a red woolly hat and I was the re-incarnation of Commandant Cousteau.



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CLOCKWISE: Sunset over Fundu Lagoon; Infinity pool at Fundu Lagoon; Lionfish; Diver with Giant Manta; Cobia catching a ride on manta



The next morning a cocktail of all four gels and shampoos revived me enough to make it down to the dive centre. The water was like a mirror, as we sped across

a Model Toby in the viewfinder. More stunning coral.

Unguja had been great, but Pemba was awesome. It's not a place for "big" encounters everydive, but the variety and volume of small to medium-sized species is outstanding, with coral crabs, magnificent partner shrimps, nudibranchs, anthias, morays galore. I wondered how I would re-adjust to diving back home? ■

the barracudas and assorted morays at Njao Gap; the multitude of marine life at Swiss Reef; and the ghost pipefish of Victoria's Secret almost to myself by

day. And when they turned their torches off momentarily on Shimba Wall at night and just followed my beam, the reef really was mine.

Dives were broken up by gourmet picnics on tidal sand islands in cyan waters under cloudless skies. It was blissful; more dream diving. Then it was time to move on for the last stop of the trip at luxurious Fundu Lagoon down south.

### Fundu Lagoon luxury

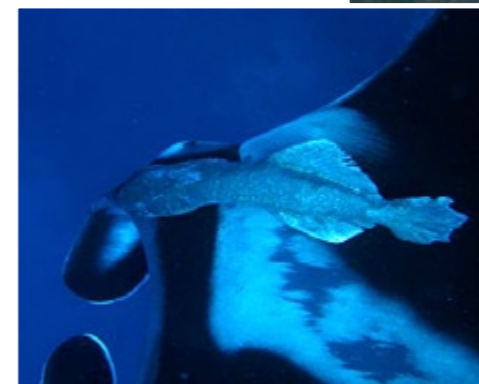
I couldn't hope to top the past week's diving, but the place itself looked impressive on the web, and the room rates certainly were at 600 USD a night per standard double, all inclusive (excluding champagne). After a 70-dollar taxi ride back to the airport, I met the Fundu transfer minibus and three well-heeled

guests. Forty-five minutes later, the driver dropped us at Pemba's main port of Mkoani where a speedboat was waiting to whisk us to the lodge, a ten-minute ride away.

The long wooden jetty was impressive, as was the discreet but warm welcome. The rooms are large safari tents inside a wooden cabin, with a magnificent ensuite shower room, complete with Fundu Lagoon's own range of four shower gels and shampoos (one of each for the morning and the evening, obviously), and a secluded bit of beach for each of the 16 rooms, the more expensive suites having their own pool, too.

The sunset views over the infinity pool and across the bay were breathtaking, and the sun setting directly behind the jetty bar and into the ocean surreal. It being a Saturday, dinner was being served on the beach, an eat-till-you-burst gourmet braai of slipper lobster, tiger prawns, and calamari washed down with excellent French wines and a few forgotten cocktails for desert.

to Misali Island and its surrounding reefs for my two last dives on Funga Pacha and Coral Mountain. Six of us baled over the side and dropped down to 18 metres (the four other guests were only Open Water certified). More clear blue water, more prolific fish life, and on the last dive, the magnificent marbled cleaner shrimp, and a last sighting of a crocodile flathead with a lionfish and



### Middle-class lodging

The next port of call was Manta Reef Lodge on the northeast tip of the island. Built on a hill just up from the beach, Manta Reef Lodge's well-appointed wooden chalets have superb views of the lagoon, and are good value for money, if you can afford 130 USD per person full board (excluding dives), given the weekly shipping in of supplies from Kenya, the excellent food, and the quality of the environment.

Over the next two days, accompanied by Van and dive master, Ali, I had the depths and the huge schools of big-eye trevally and skunk anemonefish of Fundo Gap South Wall; the unidentified but beautiful cleaner shrimps and metallic looking bubble algae of Manta Point (but no luck with the legendary mantas);